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Revelle Humanities Grammar Handbook

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17 Misplaced modifiers

Modifiers in the wrong place make it unclear what noun is being modified, or interrupt the flow and meaning of a sentence. The general rule is: place the modifier as close as possible to the noun being modified.

Misplaced modifier: As he leaves Carthage, Virgil portrays Aeneas as torn between desire and duty.

Revised: Virgil portrays Aeneas leaving Carthage as torn between desire and duty.

MODIFIER PLACEMENT



Basic Principle: Modifiers are like teenagers: they fall in love with whatever they're next to. Make sure they're next to something they ought to modify!

MISPLACED MODIFIER: Some modifiers, especially simple modifiers — *only, just, nearly, barely* — have a bad habit of slipping into the wrong place in a sentence. (In the sentence below, what does it mean to "barely kick" something?)

Confusion He barely kicked that ball twenty yards.

Repair Work He kicked that ball barely twenty yards.

The issue of the proper placement of "only" has long been argued among grammarians. Many careful writers will insist that "only" be placed immediately before the word or phrase it modifies. Thus "I only gave him three dollars" would be rewritten as "I gave him only three dollars." Some grammarians, however, have argued that such precision is not really necessary, that there is no danger of misreading "I only gave him three dollars" and that "only" can safely and naturally be placed between the subject and the verb. The argument has been going on for two hundred years.

DANGLING MODIFIER: When we begin a sentence with a

Part 2 ➤ Under the Grammar Hammer

Sentence Spice: Adjectives

There are five kinds of adjectives: *common adjectives*, *proper adjectives*, *compound adjectives*, *articles*, and *indefinite adjectives*.

1. *Common adjectives* describe nouns or pronouns.

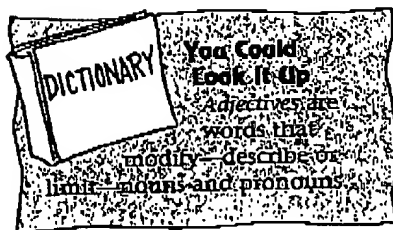
- *strong* man
- *green* plant
- *pretty* child

2. *Proper adjectives* are formed from proper nouns.

- *California* vegetables
- *Mexican* food

3. *Compound adjectives* are made up of more than one word, like these two examples:

- far-off country
- teenage person



4. *Articles* are a special type of adjective. There are three articles: *a*, *an*, and *the*.

- *The* is called a "definite article" because it refers to a specific thing.
- *A* and *an* are called "indefinite articles" because they refer to general things. Use *a* when the word that follows begins with a consonant sound; use *an* before words that begin with vowel sounds.

5. *Indefinite adjectives* don't specify the amount of something. Instead, they describe general quantities. Most of the indefinite adjectives were pronouns in their first lives. For example:

- | | |
|-----------|-----------|
| ➤ another | ➤ both |
| ➤ each | ➤ either |
| ➤ neither | ➤ few |
| ➤ many | ➤ several |
| ➤ all | ➤ any |
| ➤ more | ➤ most |
| ➤ other | ➤ some |